Killing Time with 20 Mac Projects You Can Do in 20 Minutes or Less!

BY KEVIN SAVETZ

It's 4:40 p.m., and you're getting ready to leave the office. Or maybe you're at home, waiting around for a ride. Or dinner won't be ready for a while. For whatever reason, you've got 20 minutes to kill in front of your Mac, and you're just itching to do something useful with all those seconds (that's 1,200 *whole seconds,* folks). You could spend that time aimlessly surfing the Web or playing with the Jigsaw Puzzle. Or you could embark on a project, complete it in 20 minutes, and perhaps learn a new trick or two in the process. Doesn't that sound more exciting than degaussing the monitor repeatedly? Sure, you won't get that cool flashback effect, but you might accomplish something more worthwhile.

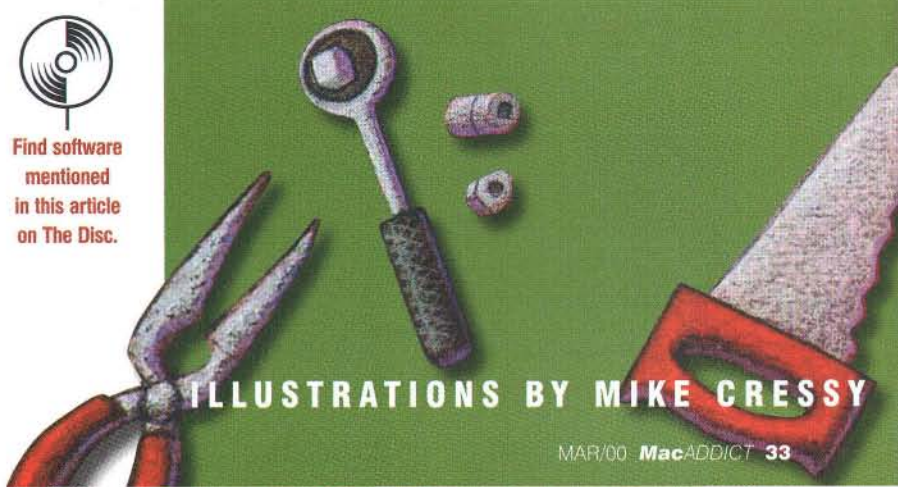
Good souls that we are, we've come up with 20 projects you can do with your Mac, each of which takes 20 minutes or less. Think of them as practical time-killers, if there is such a thing. So pick one, try it, and make the most out of every moment. Or if you have a whole day and nothing else to do, you can complete all 20 in less than seven hours for a real sense of accomplishment.

Find software mentioned in this article on The Disc.

Project 1: Set Up a Web Cam

In just 20 minutes, you can be among the elite few...uh...million people who have a Web cam on their desks. Point your QuickCam or other video source at your desk, at the cat's bed, or out the window. Next, install a Web-cam program such as CoolCam ($20, http://members.aol.com/yuv422) or SiteCam ($149, http://www.rearden.com/sitecam) so the world can watch your desk, your cat, or your window. They will just throng to see it all.

You don't even need a fast Internet connection to serve those scintillating images. Either program can periodically upload images to an FTP server at your ISP, where you can easily make them part of your Web page. If you have bandwidth to burn, you can send out streaming video or time-lapse QuickTime movies generated by your Web cam.

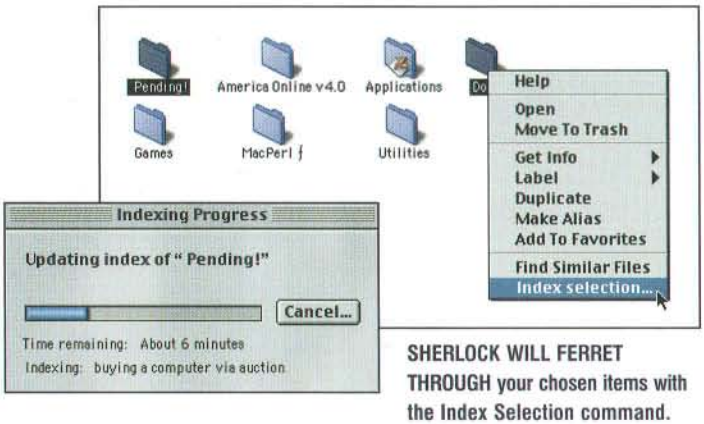


ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE CRESSY

Project 2: Index a Folder

Sherlock's Find By Content function is the best way to search for a snippet of text since the bloodhound came along. Problem is, it won't work until you've indexed your hard drive—and you need to update that index from time to time. Unfortunately, building an index of a large hard drive can take hours—many, many, many hours.

How can you create or update the index for a folder or two quickly? Control-click a folder or several folders and choose Index Selection from the contextual menu that pops up. Your Mac will dutifully (and quickly) update the Sherlock index for just those items. It's a lot faster than waiting for the whole shebang to process.



SHERLOCK WILL FERRET THROUGH your chosen items with the Index Selection command.

Project 3: Make Yourself into an Icon

How about squeezing your face into a 32-by-32-pixel square and making an icon of yourself? Sounds painful, but it's actually pretty cool. You can create a miniature self-portrait with any image editor. If you need a little assistance, use clip2icns, a shareware utility that helps create 32-bit icons (http://www.mscape.com). Here's how to do it.

STEP 1: Find a picture and scale it to a 32-pixel square. You'll also need to create a mask for it. (A square, all-black mask works well for portraits.) Copy it to the Clipboard.

STEP 2: Launch clip2icns and choose New Icon File. Press Insert to save the Clipboard as an icon.

STEP 3: You've been iconified! Now you can paste your little clone onto countless folders and files.

For more icon-creation inspiration and tips, visit http://www.iconfactory.com.

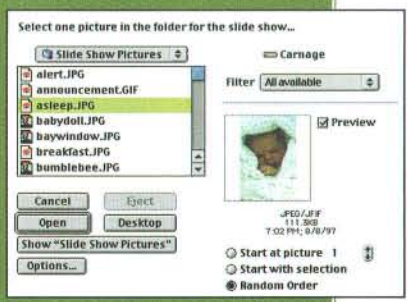
Project 4: Create a Digital Slide Show with Your Photos

You probably have graphics files littering your hard drive, so why not use them to create a digital slide show? The quickest way is with GraphicConverter ($35 shareware, http://www.lemkesoft.com).

STEP 1: Toss all your images into a single folder. Feel free to mix and match file formats.

STEP 2: Launch GraphicConverter. Choose the Slide Show function from the File menu (Command-D). Find your picture folder and choose any image in it. Tweak the options to your taste.

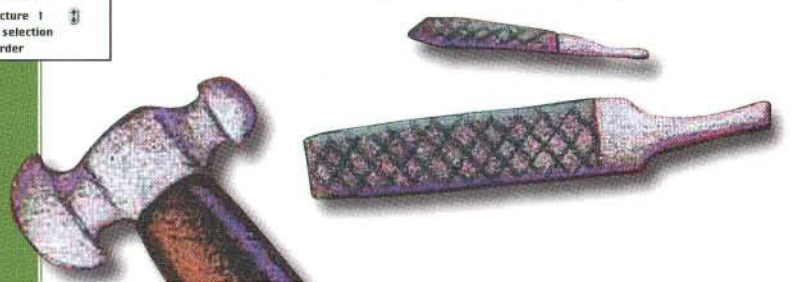
STEP 3: A simple toolbar allows you to control the flow, or you can let the program show random pictures at timed intervals.



Project 5: Update Your Software

If you've got software—and you look like someone who does—chances are at least one of the programs on your Mac is out of date. In fact, we'd bet on it. The good news is that software developers constantly update programs to add features and stomp out bugs. The bad news is that they don't come to your house personally to install the latest versions. So take a few minutes to check your system for software in need of updating.

Visit http://www.versiontracker.com, a site that makes it easy to find the latest version of thousands of Mac programs. You can download a patch by following a link. If you don't know what version you have now, click the app's icon and choose Get Info from the File menu (Command-I). VersionTracker can also notify you via email whenever an update comes out for your software.



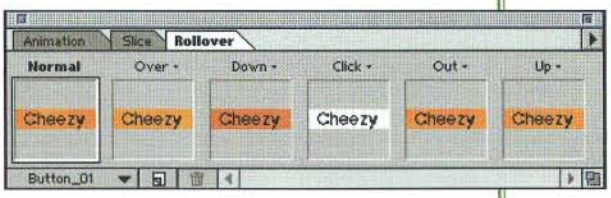
Project 6: Create Rollovers for Your Web Site

How about using your copious free time to spruce up your Web site with rollovers? These cool tricks make a graphic undergo a change when you move the cursor over it. Or you can make help text appear when you point to a particular part of the page (à la Microsoft's Tool Tips.)

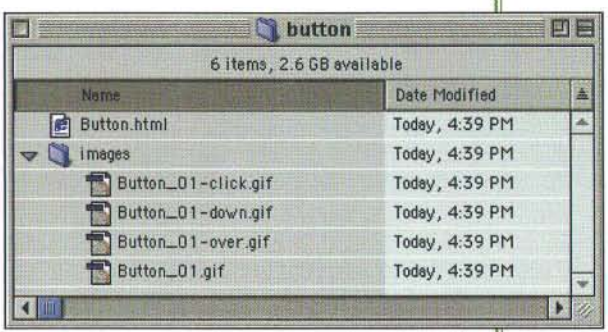
You can create rollovers using JavaScript or Cascading Style Sheets. Since you don't have all day, it's fastest to throw the problem at a Web graphics editor such as ImageReady or Fireworks. We'll show you how to do it via JavaScript in ImageReady.

STEP 1: Open ImageReady and create a button you want to put on your Web site. This is the normal state of the button—how it appears when the Web page loads.

STEP 2: Click the Create New Rollover State to create five more buttons representing various icon conditions: Over (when you roll the mouse over the button), Down (when you press and hold the mouse button while the cursor is over the button graphic), Click (when you click the mouse button while the cursor hovers over the button graphic), Out (when you roll the mouse away from the button graphic—usually the same as the normal state), and Up (when you release the mouse button—usually the same as Over).



STEP 3: The last part is easy. Choose Save Optimized from the File menu, and ImageReady exports the proper HTML and images into whatever folder you select. Then you can open the HTML file, copy the JavaScript code, and paste it into the HTML file where you'll be using the button.



Project 7: Ergonomize Your Workstation

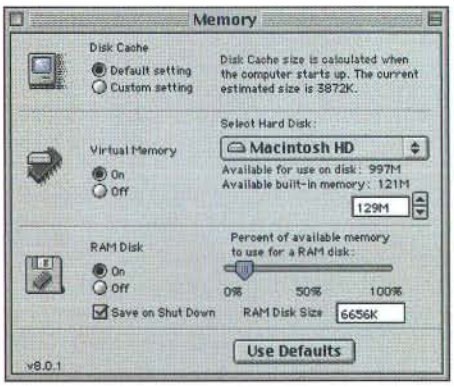
Thinking about your posture at the computer can be excellent preventive medicine. Take a moment to make sure your keyboard and mouse are within easy reach and you don't have to strain your neck to see the monitor.

Here are some questions to ask yourself. How is your posture at the computer? Are your shoulders hunched? (They shouldn't be.) Are your feet flat on the floor? (They should be.) Do you crook your neck to one side to hold the phone while you type? (You shouldn't.) Do you hang your head forward while typing? (Don't. This can strain your back muscles.) Adjust all the components of your workstation accordingly. Then read the Typing Injury FAQ at http://www.tifaq.org to learn about carpal tunnel syndrome and other repetitive-stress injuries that typing and using a mouse can cause.

Project 8: Optimize Your Browser

If your Web browser has been acting pokey lately, it's time to whip it in to shape. Start by clearing its cache and setting it to a reasonable size—5MB is perfect in most cases, less is fine if you need to save disk space (but if you're down to 5MB of free hard drive space, you might consider upgrading). If you have RAM to spare, create a RAM disk via the Memory control panel and use it as the browser cache for extra speed. To adjust your cache settings in Netscape Communicator, choose Preferences from the Edit menu, then Cache from the Advanced tab. In Microsoft Internet Explorer, choose Preferences from the Edit menu, then Advanced from the Web Browser tab.

If you use Internet Explorer, take advantage of its Forms AutoFill function. To set this up, choose AutoFill Profile from the Preferences window. Fill out your name, address, and other sundry details. Next time you need to fill out a Web form, choose AutoFill Forms from the Edit menu. Press Command-equal sign (=) to fill in the forms automatically.



USE THE MEMORY control panel to create a RAM disk for your Web browser.

If you don't usually use Java-enabled sites, consider turning off Java support in your browser. This eliminates the annoying Java startup wait you must otherwise endure when visiting random Web sites that subject you to useless Java tricks, plus you don't run the risk of Java-related crashes. Of course, if a new site doesn't work as advertised, you may have to turn Java on again to use the site.

Project 9: Record New System Sounds

When Sosumi and Simple Beep have worn out their welcome, it's time to create your own system sounds. Plug in your microphone or pop a favorite CD into your CD-ROM drive. Now open the Monitors And Sound control panel. Press the Sound button and select the input source. Next, press the Alerts button, then click Add. Use the controls to record your sound, but remember to keep it short—preferably under a second, two at most. Sound really eats up memory and hard drive space.

For a more elegant recording interface, as well as the ability to convert sounds from other formats, try Ultra Recorder ($20 shareware, http://members.aol.com/ejc3/Ultra.html).

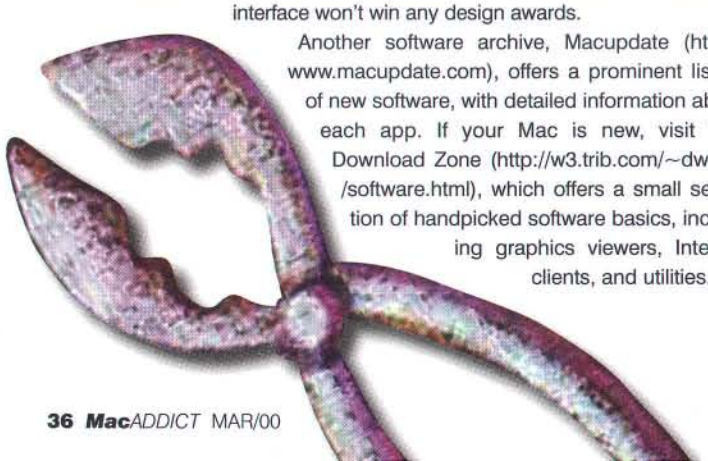
Project 10: Check Out a Demo on The Disc

Do you think we spend hours upon hours creating The Disc just for our health? We do not. Besides including a space filler of questionable utility (ahem, the staff video), we pack The Disc with dozens of great software demos. So remove that coffee cup from The Disc, put it (the media, not the mug) into the Mac, and try out some of that new software. You may find some choice tidbit you love—and you'll find several of the utilities this article mentions.

Project 11: Download and Install New Stuff

Spiff up your Mac with some new software. Point your Web browser to one of the many excellent Mac file archives, download some intriguing item, and try it out. If you have a 56-Kbps modem, you can download about 8MB in 20 minutes. CNet's Download.com (http://download.cnet.com) offers a daily download spotlight, as well as a list of the site's most popular downloads. Or try InfoMac's HyperArchive at http://hyperarchive.lcs .mit.edu/HyperArchive.html—it's one of the oldest and largest Mac software archives, although its interface won't win any design awards.

Another software archive, Macupdate (http://www.macupdate.com), offers a prominent listing of new software, with detailed information about each app. If your Mac is new, visit The Download Zone (http://w3.trib.com/~dwood/software.html), which offers a small selection of handpicked software basics, including graphics viewers, Internet clients, and utilities.

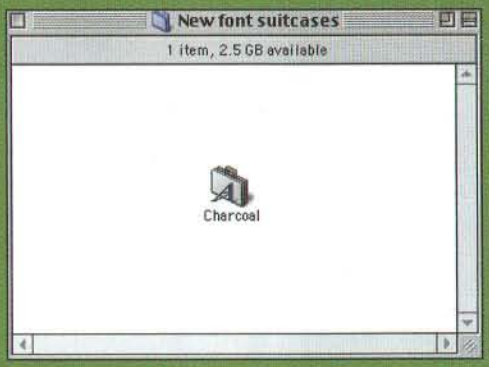


Project 12: Make Font Suitcases

Even if you're not planning any travels soon, it makes sense to pack up your font suitcases. Suitcases keep the Fonts folder tidy by grouping related TrueType or bitmapped fonts. For instance, you might use a suitcase to bundle Adobe Garamond, Adobe B Garamond Bold, and Adobe I Garamond Italic. Packing more fonts into fewer cases also means you won't hit the Mac OS limit of 128 open font suitcases so soon. (Yeah, we know—Mac OS 9 has a limit of 512 open font suitcases.)

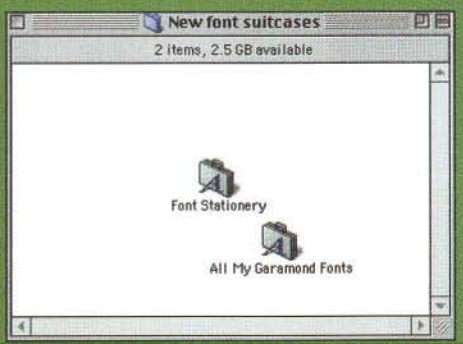
To make a font suitcase and clean up your System Folder, here's what you do.

STEP 1: Create a folder as a temporary holding place for the new suitcases you're going to create, and copy any font suitcase into this new folder from the Fonts folder.



STEP 2: Rename the font suitcase Font Stationery and double-click to open it. This suitcase will act as a master template for all the other suitcases you set up to hold groups of fonts. Drag all files inside the open suitcase into the Trash, then empty it.

STEP 3: Use your newly created font suitcase as stationery. Make a copy of it and stuff that copy with fonts galore—say, all of your monospaced fonts or all the Garamond variants. Move the newly created font suitcase into the System Folder, and you're done!



Project 13: Burn Your Own MP3 CD

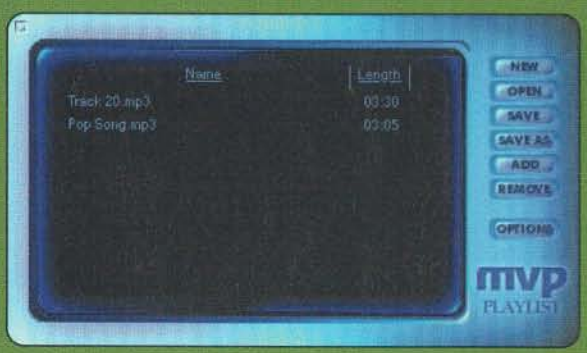
Put that CD burner to good use by burning a CD of your favorite songs in MP3 format. Then you can listen to tunes on your Mac without clogging your hard drive with those corpulent MP3 files. If you haven't visited MP3.com yet, do so (http://www.mp3.com). You'll find great (and legal) recordings in every musical genre. Or log out and copy songs from your own CD collection as MP3 files onto a CD-RW for your own use. Remember copyright law, though—those songs must be for your use only, so you can't give those CDs away.

Project 14: Create an Interactive MP3 Jukebox

Once you've got a disk full of MP3 tunes, it's time to play DJ. Use an MP3 player to arrange your files into playlists. Rearrange the songs on your favorite album or assemble tracks from various artists. Go ahead and create several playlists, one for each genre you enjoy: a jazz mix and a techno mix, for example. Here's how to do it with QDesign MVP ($20 shareware, http://www.mvpsite.com).

STEP 1: Choose New from the File menu to start a new playlist.

STEP 2: For each MP3 file you'd like to add to the playlist, click the Add button, then choose the song file.



Project 15: Build a Custom Home Page

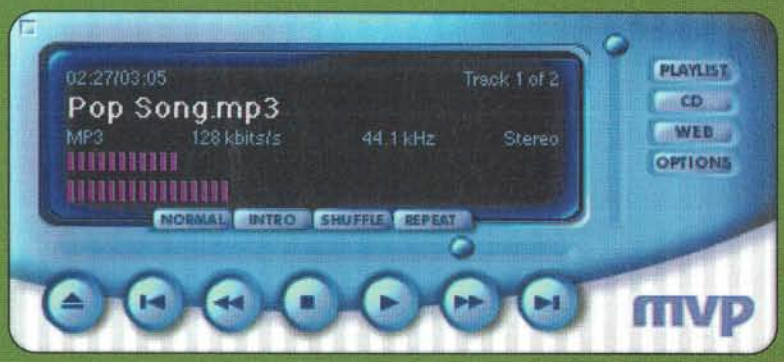
You may be one of the only people left without a Web page. You don't have to know HTML or even have a massive Pokémon collection to deserve a home page (and if you *do* have a massive Pokémon collection, your name must be Mark Simmons). If you have 20 minutes and something moderately interesting to say—or even if you want to rant incoherently—you can and should make yourself a little page on the Web. You'll need a Web page editor, so download a trial version of Freeway from http://www.softpress.com (or check one of our past discs for a free version) and get to work.

Project 16: Try Out a MacAddict How-To

Every issue has at least a couple of these—often several. Are we talking about taunting references to Prison Guy? Yeah, those too, but we really mean *How To,* the section of the mag that gives the nitty-gritty on how to accomplish something useful. Try one—it will take less time than a master's degree, and you'll probably learn more, too.

Recent issues have explained how to make interactive QuickTime movies, use your PowerBook as an external hard drive, and do amazing tricks with Photoshop. You'll often find the needed programs on The Disc, so you can get started right away.

STEP 3: When your song list is complete, click Save and name it.



Project 17: Write Steve Jobs a Letter

Take 20 minutes to let the big boss of your favorite computer company know what's on your mind. His email address is sjobs@apple.com (or so says Nikki—it may go into a vast collection of unread email). Or you can always send items (letters, pictures, worldly offerings, and so forth) via snail mail to Steve Jobs, Apple Computer, 1 Infinite Loop, Cupertino, CA 95014.

Project 18: Clean Out Your Hard Drive and System Folder

When was the last time you opened your System Folder? Do you know what goes on in there while you're not looking? Installers leave fonts and SimpleText duplicates behind like rats leave droppings. Programs wantonly create preference files, cache folders, and help files. Detritus from long-forgotten software piles up. Take a few minutes and clean it out.

A quick glance in the System Folder may reveal entire folders you can toss in the Trash. My own Mac's system folder was harboring a ColorSync Profiles folder (although I've never used and will never need ColorSync), a Spell Catcher folder (although I stopped using Spell Catcher a year ago,) and a Eudora folder (ditto).

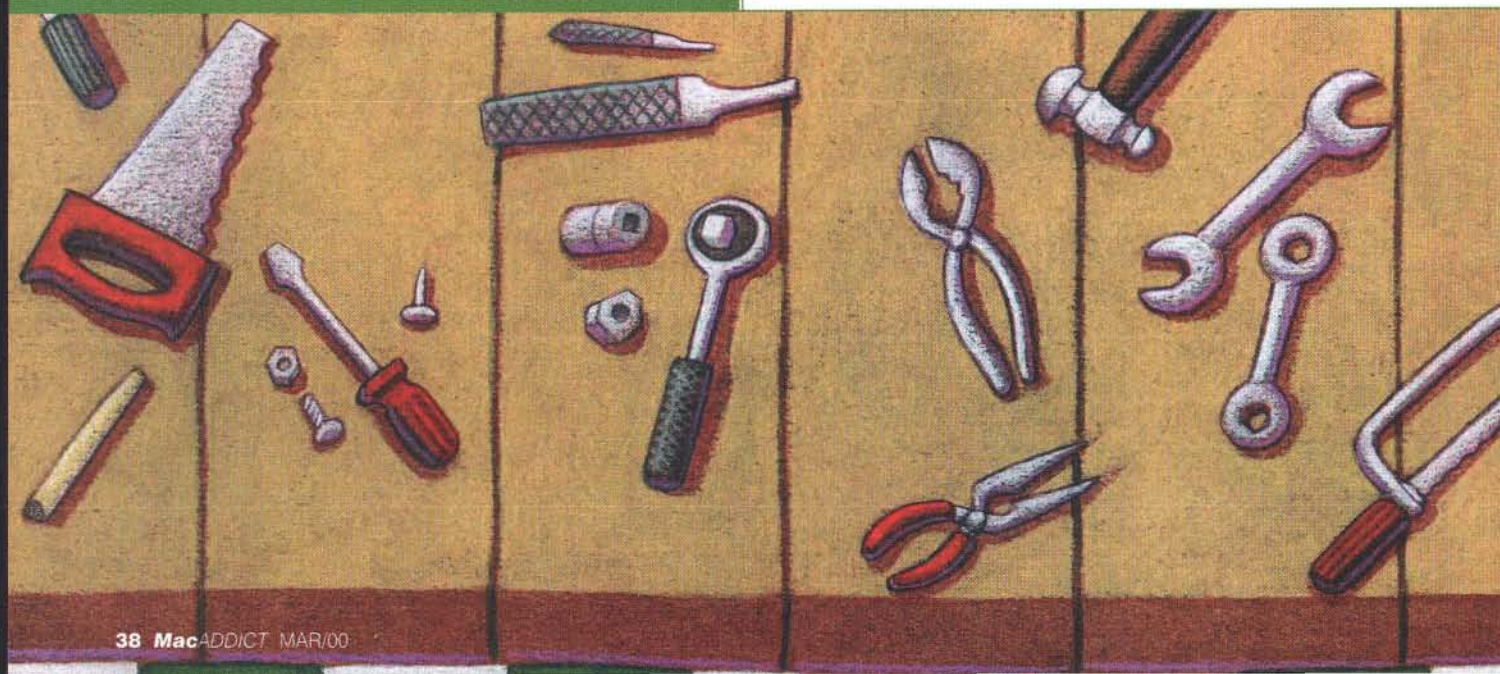
Also try Preference Packer (available from http://www.spextreme.com), a tool for removing unnecessary items from your Preferences folder.

While you're in the cleaning, disinfecting, and ordering mood, peruse other folders looking for space wasters. A game you no longer play—trash it. A beta version of a crash-prone email client—nuke it. Clean up the mess you've created on your Mac's hard drive.

Project 19: Make Your Own Sticker

Here's a 20-minute activity that's fun for adults and kids alike. Visit the stationery store (or just sneak into the office supply room—I won't tell) and get some sheets of sticky labels. They come in all shapes and sizes, from return-address format to full-page sheets. Put them in your printer, load up some graphics-editing software, and create your own stickers. You can grab clip art from a favorite Web site or even create your own with a graphics program. Finally, you've got a use for the color cartridge in your inkjet printer.

Project 20: Say Something Smart in a Chat Room

Joining a chat room can be a great way to waste—er, spend some time and meet people. Drop by http://chat.yahoo.com for easy-to-use Java-based chat. If you're an America Online member, you'll find AOL's own chat rooms at keyword People Connection. Or you can try the granddaddy of Net chat—Internet Relay Chat. Visit http://www.irchelp.org for a helpful guide to IRC as well as a roundup of Mac IRC clients. There's also a very cool set of chats at World Without Borders (http://www.worldwithoutborders.com).

When Kevin Savetz (savetz@northcoast.com) has 20 minutes to spare, he can be found playing old video games with MAME (Multi-Arcade Machine Emulator), learning to fly, or napping. Kevin also writes the weekly Geek for Sale column at AuctionRover.com.